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THE
PRIMA DONNA:

A

PASSAGE FROM CITY LIFE.

BY W. G. SIMMS,

AUTHOR OF "GUY RIVERS," "THE YEMASSE," "RICHARD HURDIS," ETC.

Mephistopheles.—Methinks, 'twere better far,
In place of these vain wanderings through the woods,
Didst thou requite the monkey for her love.
The hours to her are lamentably long,—
She stands beside the window, day by day,
To watch the shapeless clouds, and see them roll
Away, above the old walls of the town.
"Were I a bird!"—thus ever runs her song
Through the long day and the yet longer night:—
A moment cheerful,—but she lapses soon
To sadness, which is lasting: then she weeps
'Till tears refuse to come:—then quiet seems,
But lovesick, not the less.

Faust.—Oh, serpent, serpent!—GOETHE'S FAUST.

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THE PRIMA DONNA.

CHAPTER I.

I HAD changed my lodgings, seeking shelter in the suburbs, from the crowd and confusion of Broadway and the Park. The omnibus, at a shilling a ride, enabled me, while enjoying a seclusion akin to that of country life, to seek the city at any moment when pleasure or business called me thither. The second morning after my transition, I suffered myself to look round upon my new neighbourhood. I found myself in very good quarters for a single man. Our house was well arranged and spacious. It stood apart from all others, while, on either hand, the green of a well-stored vegetable garden gratified the eye, and the breezes from two quarters of the compass poured in at my windows. We were just in advance of the onward march of city improvements. Our pavements were incomplete, and the clang and clamour of cart, cab and carriage, were moderate accordingly, when compared with the stunning sounds with which they momentarily assailed me in Broadway. But, as if to qualify this advantage, there was just opposite, one of those annoyances which are to be found in the suburbs of every large city, in the shape of a cluster of low, crowded and filthy looking rookeries,—a nest of wooden structures, dingy, dark, narrow, and tumbling to decay, which still, however, gave shelter to a crowd of inmates. Every tenement of this nest, was filled from basement to attic;—the people were of the very poorest, and some of them, evidently, of the most dissolute, character. Rags and dirt were the conspicuous badges at every window, and no prospect could be more melancholy than that of the poor, puny, little children, who were despatched from rise of morn to set of sun, to glean, as beggars, from better furnished portions of the city, their daily supplies of pennies and “cold victuals.”

I am not, however, one of those persons who sicken at the thousand aspects of human misery. Some experience of the world and its vicissitudes, acquired at a period when other men are usually about to begin their lessons, had fortified my senses, and prepared me to look with fortitude, if not indifference, upon those evils of life which are unhappily inevitable. I did not forego the prospect from the window, because it showed me suffering as well as sunshine; and, if I could not, in any great degree, alleviate the one, I saw not, in consequence, any good reason why I should reject or forego the other. My morning

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and afternoon contemplations included the 'rookeries.' I saw the outgoings and incomings of their motley population, and acquired, after a moderate period, a certain degree of interest, in some few of the several inhabitants. There was one old woman, a sturdy Meg Merrilies sort of body, who carried out, empty, a sack some five feet in length, which I am sure she always brought home full. What she brought, and what use she made of the commodity, I never troubled myself to inquire or even to conjecture. The simple appearance of the old dame at her departure and return, was enough for my curiosity. In going forth, her tongue sounded an alarm to the whole neighbourhood, which sufficiently apprised it of that important event. Very different was the manner of her return. She entered without beat of drum. Her tongue was most singularly silent, and the fierce, consequential air with which she sallied forth, was exchanged for that of the most quiet, meek and cautious of all humble adventurers. She was not my only acquaintance among the inhabitants of this motley settlement. There was a great, hulking, heavily built person most like a sailor in appearance, but one, evidently too well fed to relish a frequent journey to the cross-trees, who also secured some portion of my daily consideration. He, too, presented himself under different aspects, at his diurnal periods of egress and return. In the first case, he went forth, feeble, tottering, slightly lamed, and, I think, irrecoverably blind;—a decided improvement, however, always followed his morning visit to the city. He evidently met with Brandreth, the pill dealer, and Williams, the oculist, by the way. His eye-sight left him in no doubt about his "homeward bound" course; and his legs were then better able to pursue it. This was the more remarkable, as, at such periods, his arms were usually filled with stuffs, clothes, food and fragments of one description or another, in such quantity and weight as might have given a more vigorous person reason to stagger beneath the burden. He evidently pursued his craft with a success which convinced me that he might have arrived, in other days, at a post of high command even in Alsatia. There were other persons in this community, who, in their places and periods, also provoked, though in a far less degree, my observation and inquiry; and it would not, perhaps, be a very difficult matter, were I so minded, to awaken a similar interest in most of my readers in behalf of one or more individuals of its population, quite as mysterious as that of the "Stout Gentleman," of one of our most graceful writers, whom all are pleased to honour. Certainly, there were physical allotments among my friends of the 'rookery,' which, alone, were sufficient to impress the spectator with heedful deference. Brawny arms of Hibernian vigour brandished the broom, and flourished in the suds. Voices, of aristocratic authority, rose suddenly and stunningly upon the senses, and never did the damsels of Eleusinia declare themselves in a dialect of more

unctuous emphasis and spirit in the hearing of assembled Greece. Of the mysterious character of those business operations which were pursued among them, I have already spoken. A very curious scandal-monger in literature might live for months in the periodicals by examining the domestic records of my suburban neighbourhood.

My tastes did not exactly lead me to institute any such examination. I was content to see the beauties of the scene afar off. Morning and evening glimpses satisfied my curiosity; and my old woman with her long sack, and my sturdy sailor with his imperfect eyesight, upon both of whom such radical changes took place in the progress of each diurnal sun, were studies which amply requited all my curious *cacoëthes*. The morning cries and clamour of the former aroused me from sluggish slumbers; and her usual period of return at evening, was equivalent to the tintinabulary summons to my evening repast—both of these important events happening to occur usually at the same hour of the day. A little pleasurable excitement, which was pleasurable, perhaps, only because of the excitement, served to reconcile me to a neighbourhood, the contemplation of which, while it failed to stimulate curiosity, did not contribute to the gratification of any of my usual tastes. I was just sufficiently remote from the scene I witnessed, to make it visible to me through that hallowing medium which turns the past into poetry, and elevates the foreign into dignity and grace. I must confess to a reluctance to any nearer approximation, which was so strong as to prompt me to make use of the back door of my lodging house, in the greater number of cases; and to seek, by a street in the rear, that outlet to the city, which, otherwise, could only have been marked by almost actual contact with the suds and sentiment of the ‘rookery.’

CHAPTER II.

BUT a few days made a great difference in my mode of thinking and feeling in regard to some of the persons of my Alsatia. The cries and clamors of which I have spoken—as the familiar sounds from that neighbourhood, underwent a sweet and singular modification. A new and very different voice from the rest, aroused me one morning from my slumbers, and drew me to my window, with a sentiment of pleasurable anxiety, which was altogether new to my experience. Such a voice—of so much power—so much sweetness—so touching, so energetic, at once so expansive and insinuating, arch and tremulous—passionate, yet full of the most gentle fear.

I am not a musician myself. I am neither performer nor con-

noisseur, nor do I profess to have any great passion for that most pure and elevated of all the sensual luxuries :—but I should have been more or less than mortal to have withstood the

“Divine, enchanting ravishment,”

of that voice whose sudden song, penetrating the thick folds of sleep which enveloped me, commanded me to rise from my couch and compelled me to listen. The song was an English one—one of those simple old ballad ditties, the taste for which has undergone some revival in recent days ;—but the air was decidedly foreign. The artifices of Italian music linked with the direct, natural and earnest language of English poetry, struck me on subsequent reflection, as suggesting a moral d'scord, which was unpleasant ; but, while the performance lasted I was not sensible to this or any objection. I had no time to make it—no feeling for dissent or dissatisfaction, and it was only, long after the voice became silent, that, in seeking to be critical I found any thing to qualify its complete harmonies. I listened breathlessly while it proceeded. I was confounded to perceive that it came from a hovel, the very meanest of the group, which stood almost in the centre of the ‘rookery.’ If I wondered, however, at the first moment of the discovery, I had no time, just then, to yield myself up to mere astonishment. Delight occupied all the emotions of my soul ; and it was not until the music had ceased for several moments, that I was able to shake myself free from that overpowering spell which its sovereign sweetness had imposed upon me. It was only when my ears ceased to find employment, that my eyes began to resume their accustomed exercise. It was only then, that, in examining the miserable dwelling from which such intoxicating sounds arose, I perceived the partial profile—at one of the low, unsashed windows—of a woman, seemingly very youthful, in whose style of face, I fancied I discerned the marked outlines of the English character, and yet, not entirely English. The black eyes—hair, long and glossy, of the same colour, which streamed upon a neck of unusual whiteness, seemed to distinguish one who had in her veins a warm, rich tincture of Milesian blood. I subsequently discovered, however, that she was of direct English parentage. Still, her more remote ancestors might have come from the sister Isle.

I had now a new employment for my vacant hours, and a new motive for the survey of my ‘rookery.’ I watched and listened long enough, and often enough, to discover, in the next five days, sufficient cause for a greatly-increased wonderment. The girl—for she was young enough to be considered under this head,—was really beautiful. Her appearance, air, manner and behaviour, were such, also, as to justify the belief that she had come of good family, had been used to gentle nurture, and had been blessed with something more than an ordinary educa-

tion. Yet how came she in such a place—so meanly habited—so poorly tended—so wretchedly provided for? The hovel which she occupied, was decidedly one of the meanest of the ‘row.’ The apartment in which I usually beheld her, and which I could easily overlook from mine, was almost entirely without furniture. A rude box beside the window formed the only seat which I perceived it to contain; and the bed, the foot of which was all that I could see, was spread out upon the floor. The wild and tender ballad which she sang—the style of her performance—the subdued and sweet resignation of her countenance the while,—how little did these correspond with the wretched state of every thing around her! What could have brought her to this condition? I mused over this question long, and approached it frequently. The answer which I found seldom satisfied me. I was unwilling to believe that mere misfortunes, the hazards of a capricious fate alone, could have so reduced worth, accomplishment and talent;—and yet, how difficult,—looking on her face of angelic purity of expression, and a placid resignation not less angelic,—to believe that she was the victim of guilt—the creature, self-impelled to sin, by her own bad passions, or pliant virtue.

CHAPTER III.

THE more I thought, the more I was confused; and I became hourly more and more interested in the subject. My caution and my studies, and sometimes my landlady and supper, were equally forgotten. I became something of an amateur in music; though, after the few first days, my eyes were probably far more busy than my ears. I almost lived at that window of my chamber which looked out upon the ‘rookery.’ My own movements, at length, came to be almost as much matter of observation and scrutiny to others, as were those of the fair singer to myself. Perhaps, I became somewhat indiscreet in the watch which I kept over her. Not content with the advantages of my position, I was tempted forth at evening by the sweet song of the syren, and without determining upon my movements, by the exercise of any previous thinking, I found myself, finally, under her very window.

This was a stretch of freedom rather large for one who had usually maintained, in his conduct, something like the regimen of a purist. It was an indulgence, the exercise of which soon brought me a rebuke, which, if it did not fully answer the intended purpose, of chiding me back to my own territory, at least served to remind me that I was an invader of that of another. The second time that I ventured to cross the street and place

myself beneath the window of the musician, she was engaged in a touching little ditty, which I had never heard before, and the mournful sweetness of which brought to my soul as I listened a most luscious sentiment of grief. Perhaps I should have been amply satisfied to listen from my own chamber, had not the tones of her voice been unusually low. There was, that night, a faintness in her utterance which seemed to denote a full feeling in her heart of the sorrowful sentiment which other lips only sung. An undefinable curiosity made me throw by my books, extinguish my lamp, put on my cap, and steal forth to the 'rookery.' The evening was dark—a faint starlight through apertures in a dense mass of sullen clouds served only to confuse the aspects of general objects;—and secure, as I fancied myself, from all observation, I crossed the street, and placed myself against a lamp-post which stood in front of the miserable dwelling. Here I had not been many minutes before the music ceased. I could hear a brief conversation carried on in low but harsh tones in the apartment which had been so lately the prison of the sweetest song. The mean light of the chamber seemed extinguished, and while I waited for the strain to be resumed, the door below suddenly opened, and I was abruptly confronted by one, who, emerging from the dwelling, in almost rude accents, demanded my business.

CHAPTER IV.

THERE was surely something very impertinent in the demand. I had, by the common law, quite as much right to be where he found me as any body, so long as my presence did not conflict with the similar rights of any other citizen. The querist was a man, slight of frame, apparently decrepid in his limbs, and evidently an Italian. I could see by the lamplight, in the full glare of which he stood, that he was violently agitated. His thin, dark features were almost convulsed—his lips quivered, and his eyes emitted a fiery gleam, in which I fancied that I beheld the expression of a very malignant and personal hostility. This was all matter of very curious surprise to me, and it was only, I suppose, because of my exceeding surprise, that I did not, at the first moment, resent the impertinence of his demand. It may be that I felt also, that, however justly, according to law, I might maintain my position where I was, in spite of him or any body else, yet that, in my heart, and some of its desires, I was, in truth, a trespasser upon his rights. I certainly longed to get into his household—if it were his,—and to gaze my fill, at the sweet prisoner-bird thereof. That she was a caged songstress, I could not allow myself to doubt. I had caught, during the day, more than one glimpse of

her sweet, sad countenance; and I fancied, more than once, that I read in her eyes as they encountered mine, the yearning to be free. Perhaps, in this reading of her eyes, my boyish vanity led me to fancy that I saw a great deal more. Perhaps—but there will always be time enough for the confessional. Enough to say that my conscience somewhat interfered in the desire which I certainly should have felt under other circumstances, of knocking my impertinent querist into the gutter, in answer to his demand.

As the matter was, I hesitated—actually stammered, and failed to reply in a satisfactory manner either to him or to myself, until provoked to a right feeling of resolution by the repetition, in broken English, of his inquiry:—

“What you do here? What you want?” The style of the question was unbearable—the manner in which his face was thrust forward into mine, was not to be endured, and I boldly blunted out the truth, or that which was truth, *per se*, with a look and accent of defiance.

“I stop here because it pleases me—because I wish to hear the music.”

“Ah, ha!—it please you, dis music, eh? But you shall be go to you place—you shall nevere come stop here, no more,—nevere!”

And the shrivelled, angry, bilious, fiery-eyed little fellow, shook his finger almost in my face.

Human stomach could not stand this, and an involuntary emotion caused me to double my fist and raise my arm, with an action which left him in little doubt of my summary intentions. He receded at the sight, and, as I fancied, in order to effect a retreat as abrupt as had been his entrance upon the scene; but I was mistaken. It was only the better to prepare himself for defence. In another moment a stiletto glittered in his hand, and he assumed an attitude of the most determined preparation. This would not have discouraged me,—for I was conscious that a frame evidently so feeble as his, armed with any weapon, the use of which depended upon his muscle, could not oppose much obstacle to the blow of an arm like mine, endowed with no small share of masculine vigour, and under the direction, too, of some small science, the due result of an occasional exercise, in a very good school of the fancy. I felt confident that I could have “muffled his skylights” in a single instant, and long before his Italian weapon could be brought to bear upon the action. But a moment’s reflection convinced me how seriously foolish would be any conduct which would bring me into a street-brawl with one like my opponent—so feeble in person—so superior in years—and so wretched in his condition. My arm was instantly lowered, and, murmuring something of a disinclination to chastise age, however impertinent, I was about to draw off from the ground

and seek my own proper bulwarks. But he was not disposed to suffer this; availing himself of a change in my position, which half removed my face from him, he sprang towards me,—with what purpose I could only conjecture. I had just time to turn and grasp his uplifted arm, from which I wrenched the weapon. In another moment, such was my indignation, I might have used it upon him; but I was happily spared this folly, by the sudden appearance, from the house, of the young woman who had been the innocent occasion of all this difficulty. At her approach I withdrew the grasp which I had taken upon the fellow. He trembled like an aspen in the wind. His teeth chattered—with rage, not fear. He shook his impertinent finger at me in hate and defiance; and when the hand of the woman was put upon his shoulder, as she threw herself between us, he flung her from him with a degree of violence, which almost renewed in my heart the desire to pummel him. The next moment he grasped her about the body and dragged her within the entrance. Her eyes were turned full upon me while she was passing from sight; and it was a small solace to my feelings at that instant, to fancy, as I did, that there was any thing but unkindness for me in their expression. I was but a youth at that period, and the vanity which seems natural enough to youth, must not be visited by the reader with too harsh an expression of opinion.

CHAPTER V.

HOWEVER ruffled I might have been by this event, there was yet something in it which soothed and satisfied me. The heart of man is a very selfish substance, even in its impulses of greatest generosity. Perhaps, in a world, in which so superior and vast a proportion of the performance depends upon man, it is not unfitting that it should be so. He must be impelled by influences of self even to the execution of those social achievements which would seem to be most universal in their tendencies and aims. But this is no place to philosophize. It is enough for me to confess that I found pleasure in the conviction that the unknown songstress was unhappy, without finding it a cause of unhappiness to meet my glance—that she dwelt with one who was evidently not satisfied with her; and with whom—she being the creature of taste and sensibility which I readily assumed her to be—she could still less be satisfied. But in what relation did they stand to one another? This was a mystery to me, which brought with it feelings of disquietude and pain. He was old enough to be her father. Was he so? I would have given something—though I knew not wherefore—could I have believed it. I prayed, unconsciously, that she was not his wife,—

and shuddered, the next moment, with the apprehension that she might be something less, and something worse.

For two days after this I heard no music, and in all this time the windows remained closely fastened. I saw nothing of the songstress;—but the man, to whom I now addressed no moderate degree of my attention, but whom before, though I had seen, I had scarcely noted—he went forth as usual, just after my breakfast hour had been passed. I took the precaution now, to do my espionage through the blinds of my window, which I kept as carefully closed as my opposite neighbour. I could see that his eyes were cast upwards as he passed out and came in, and I readily conjectured, that, having noted my constant watchfulness from the window, the quick instinct of jealousy converted my appearance at night beneath his, into proofs, and

“Confirmation strong as holy writ,”

of evil purposes contemplated, and, possibly, evil deeds performed. Yet, truly, did I mean no evil. At the worst, that susceptible vanity of the youthful heart which makes it equally ready to exercise its own, and to believe that the afflictions of another are sympathetically awakened, was all my error. The strange surprise of hearing such music, and seeing such a face, in such a dwelling, was, perhaps, more than any thing beside, the source of that interest which the songstress awakened in my bosom. Had she come and gone, without bringing about the annoying little incident just mentioned, she would most probably have been nothing more in my eyes and thought, than any other among the “sweet singers of Israel.”

CHAPTER VI.

It was impossible, now, that I should feel any such indifference. Curiosity was awakened, within me, and sharpened into activity all those other emotions which had been merely roused before. Every thing about her lowly household had now an interest in my sight which kept me feverishly alive to every sound which reached my ears from, and every movement of life which took place in, that quarter. Her ugly, little, bilious-faced and fiery-eyed protector, was, in particular, an object of excessive concern with me; and I followed his rickety movements, as he went abroad, and was careful to scrutinize them as he returned home, as if it were possible for me to derive from such a scrutiny a knowledge of those secrets which had become so annoyingly worth knowing. I was not long, however, permitted to maintain this watch upon his movements. On the third morning after the night on which we had encountered, I was impressed

with the conviction, after resuming my usual post of survey at my window, that the dwelling of the suspicious pair was no longer occupied. An air of unusual stillness overspread the establishment. The windows and doors were all sealed up and silent. No smoke ascended from the chimney—no voice resounded from the enclosure—no old woman knocked at the gate for entrance—nobody went in and nobody came out. It presented a lamentable contrast to the busy hum of the thick clustering hive around it. I waited with some impatience for the breakfast hour. I hurried through the meal without asking whether I had satisfied appetite, and certainly without doing justice to my landlady's coffee biggin. I hastened back to my window, and waited for the customary departure of my male neighbour on his daily journey. He failed to appear as usual; and I was pained to think that I should hear no more music from the lips of the sweet, but melancholy stranger. My fears were well-grounded. My venerable landlady congratulated herself at dinner, that those noisy people, across the street, who sang so loud, had moved away under cover of the last night—the latter circumstance being one that awakened all the good old lady's apprehensions for the security of the rent due; in which an old lady of like dimensions with herself, had, it appears, considerable interest. But even this fear did not diminish her satisfaction at the removal when she recollected her escape from the music which annoyed her. The other sounds from the 'rookery,'—vile, various and discordant as they were—never offended a single sense in her whole system. They were natural and familiar, and, like certain other natural and familiar objects, they "signified love."

But to me this confirmation of my fears brought with it a degree of discomposure for which I was myself unprepared. I had sustained a loss, which pressed for the moment heavily upon me;—the loss of that object of secret sympathy which responds to our emotions, though in tears that we are not permitted to see, and in sighs that we cannot hear. I felt the privation so seriously, and my curiosity had been so highly stimulated, that I could no longer keep within the house, and actually sallied forth, on the wild-goose chase of looking-up the fugitives in such a city as New York.

A few hours ramble soon cured me of this folly, though it failed to bring me to my senses. I gave up the search after persons whose names I did not know, and who, if they had not left the city, could only have found shelter in some one of the thousand purlicues of destitution which cover its filthy spots. I returned home soured and dissatisfied, and went back, in sheer doggedness of purpose, to my solitude and studies.

CHAPTER VII.

It may have been three weeks, or more, after this, that there was a great stir in New York about a foreign Prima Donna—a singer whose excellence was equally indisputable and great. The newspapers which, in such matters, usually speak in the superlative style of *Euphrosine*, and in words as magnificent as those of Brobdignag, now, in the excessive warmth of their enthusiasm, happened upon a newer set of phrases, which left the ancient forms of eulogy far behind them. The fountains of public admiration were opened. The praises of the new candidate for applause and sixpences, sounded from the high places of authority, were heard repeated at every corner. The singer was pronounced to be one who could sing louder, squeak longer, and prolong the note through a more numerous and symmetrical set of quavers than any vocalist of past or present celebrity. She was, in short, the last lion of the town, and absorbed in her own glory, for a season, its thousand phrases of hyperbole.

As a general rule I never suffer myself to do as all the town does; but on this occasion I fell into the current and went forward with the stream. I had my reasons, apart from any curiosity either to see the lion or to hear his roar, which induced me to depart from my wonted resolution. I fancied that the music of the new performer would impair my recollection of the old, and do away with the impression of that which I had lost so suddenly. Up to this time I still deceived myself with the fancy that all my interest in the unknown creature whom I so much missed, had been the pure result of her musical sweetness and superiority. I went—the house was full to overflowing—all hearts save my own were full of expectancy and impatience. The curtain rose—the crowd roared and clapped. With an indifference the most unfashionable, I looked up at the performer, and beheld in the famous Prima Donna, my own musical Unknown!

CHAPTER VIII.

It may be readily imagined that my indifference, from that instant, disappeared. I was now all eyes and ears and devoted attention. I drank in every sound, watched every expression, and was ready to believe any extravagance which the public enthusiasm might exhibit or express. She was triumphant in her performances that night. She was said, by the critics, even to have surpassed herself. Opinion had but one voice, and that was admiration; feeling but one emotion, and that was love. She

was, indeed, a most lovely creature. Her form, which I now beheld entire, and in a perfect light, for the first time, was one, harmoniously rounded into grace, whose every movement seemed to swell into expression. She looked admirably the character she played—for the time she was—one of those sylphs of the moonlight and the sea, which breathed in poetic spirituality from the works of the ancient masters of English romance. Nor was the intellectual spirituality of her appearance, lessened by the unvarying sadness which prevailed upon her countenance,—a sadness not unfitly suited to the looks of a being otherwise pure and designing to be so,—born for heaven, and ultimately secure of it, but whom, a single, sad lapse, has banished into short but painful exile from its bright and blessing abodes.

I cannot say that I listened to, or even heard, the music. The seat which I occupied was in the pit, and so near to the footlights—the orchestra being between, that I could note every change in the expression of her face. I may have deceived myself, but I certainly fancied, that she at length saw mine. If she did, she read a volume in the quivering of my lip—in the tearful admiration of my eye. There was one period in her performance when I *know* that she beheld me. She had advanced to the outer edge of the proscenium in obedience to the action of the piece. My emotions had been gaining strength for a considerable time before. Heedless of the impropriety I had risen from my seat, and without a consciousness of my folly until forcibly drawn back to my place by some one behind me, my motion towards the stage had corresponded entirely with hers. The good people ascribed to a music frenzy the absurdity of my conduct. But she—she knew better; she saw the movement of my person—she beheld the outstretched action of my hand, and never could intelligence like hers, mistake the unequivocal language in my eye. Her countenance changed on the instant—I could see *that*, though I could see little else—her cheeks became flushed, her lips trembled and her voice for the first time faltered as she sung, while her eye was fixed upon me with a tearful but sweet intensity of gaze.

Let it be remembered that I was little more than a boy at this period—that I had seen very little of the witchery of dramatic representation—that I had no sort of suspicion of guile in the heart of one, who could personate innocence and grief quite as truly as her own form and features personated loveliness—that I looked upon the ideal in all things, and knew nothing of the real; and believed that truth was an undoubted presence, for ever manifested where it was professed. To those who have been once young, I need not undertake to account for this confidence in the humanities—to those who are still young, there will be no need for me to make any such attempt. Enough that I looked, listened and believed. I will not say that I loved. I am not sure that there is any passion in the heart of man worthy of the name

of love, until the character is fixed by experience, and the heart subdued by some degree of suffering. Perhaps it will be quite enough to admit that my passions were active—my sensibilities—without referring to any more subtle influence.

CHAPTER IX.

I WAITED with indescribable impatience for the close of the performance, and was the first, when she retired from the stage, to leave the theatre. I went round and stationed myself at the place of private egress. My former adventure under her window had taught me to be cautious, and I took care to place myself as much in shadow as possible. Here I watched and waited, counting the moments as if they had been hours, and even reproaching the object of my admiration, as if she had known that I awaited her. In reality there was no great delay. It might have been a half hour after her share in the performance was ended when she came forth, conducted by her ancient protector. They passed close beside me, her garments brushed against me, and her eye, keen and quickened, as I fancied by feelings like my own, rested full upon my face. Involuntarily, she seemed to pause, and I trembled with a secret joy which the restraints upon it seemed to heighten. Her attendant, however, hurried her forward, fortunately without beholding me, and I only lingered long enough behind to avoid awakening his suspicions.

I had not far to follow them. At the corner of the same street a carriage stood in waiting, into which she entered, closely followed by her protector. Vainly did I stretch my head forward to catch the words of direction which he uttered to the driver. My hope was about to be defeated, and all my labour taken in vain. There was but a single alternative. I bounded forward lightly, and, amidst the rattle of the carriage as it rolled away from the stand, placed myself upon the flat in the rear without detection.

Our course lay toward the suburbs, but on a side of the city as far as possible from that which they had left. My anxieties while we rode were prodigious. I heard the occasional words which were spoken by those within the vehicle—those of the man were most frequent,—hers were monosyllables only, and so faintly spoken that I could not divine their character. I would have given worlds to have risen upon the flat and looked in upon the ill-connected couple, but I dared not incur the risk of such a movement. At length we approached our stopping place. The speed of the horses was lessened—the carriage was about to stop, and I leapt to the ground in anticipation of this event. A tree, one of the few which city improvements had left in the

neighbourhood, yielded me a covering from which I beheld without difficulty the new place of retreat which the fugitives had chosen. The edifice itself in which they lived was of that better sort, which amply testified to the successes and improved fortunes of the Prima Donna. It was now of brick, newly built, two stories in height, with green blinds, a small verandah on the southern side, and a little patch of green sward in front. You passed to the door of the dwelling through a low white paling gate, upon a neatly gravelled walk edged with box, trimmed grenadier fashion, in stiff, slender and unbroken lines. I made these observations that night after the departure of the carriage. I gave myself ample time for the survey, for it grew rapidly to the small hours of the morning before I left the spot and returned to my own lodging house.

Shall I confess my folly? The next night found me again at the theatre, and every night on which she did not perform, I was a ghostlike stalker through the lonely street—to me not lonely—in which she lived. She saw me not—she knew not of my proximity, though I sometimes fancied, with the vanity of a youthful spirit, that she suspected it. She had seen me at the theatre—she had seen me beneath the lamp on the night when I followed her home. She could not doubt the admiration which was expressed by my action and my eyes, and surely, she knew enough of the nature of man to know that where his heart is, there will his form be also. I drew conviction, on this head, from another fact. Nightly and constantly she sang while I traversed the *parc* before her dwelling; and the strains were those of a sad tenderness, of a heart pouring forth the irrepressible moans of a defeated love. At the theatre, her eyes—so I persuaded myself—frequently sought out mine; and it seemed to me, at such moments, that her song trembled, and her voice became subdued, even though the burden of the music called for the greatest exertion of her powers. How small and shadowy are the tokens which persuade the youthful imagination into confidence and hope!

CHAPTER X.

THE passion which this girl had awakened in my bosom was such as to lead me to a complete departure from many of my usual habits. I now remembered certain old acquaintance among the editorial fraternity—clever, good-humoured fellows—who, I well knew, possessed *carte blanche* at all the theatres. One of these, in particular,—a vivacious literary and political writer—a fellow who could write a comedy after supper and a review before breakfast, and who was sufficiently popular in the

community to do as he pleased with every body—had been a frequent companion of my idle hours during my first acquaintance with New York. Him I had seen frequently at the theatre while my inamorata was playing, and his voice, through the medium of his papers, had been one of the loudest in her eulogy. I resolved on renewing my acquaintance with him, and availing myself, as far as I could, of the privileges which he possessed to procure some of those which I desired. I did accordingly. I called on him, and after listening to his good-humoured reproaches at what he was pleased to call my neglect of old friends, I plainly told him what I came for. I wished an introduction to the Prima Donna.

“Ah, ha!” said he—“so you too are among the thousand in the meshes of Mam’selle _____.”

“She is then unmarried?” I exclaimed—“she is not the wife of _____”

“The little old Othello that has her in keeping! Well! of that the least said the better. We know nothing. Enough to tell you that she passes for his wife, and for aught that any body knows in New York, she may be.”

“But you call her ‘Mam’selle?’”

“True, but that means nothing. A miss is always more attractive in theatrical parlance than a mistress; and I have known, in Green Room history, a woman who had buried eleven husbands, more or less, who never once changed her maiden name in the bills! This is only a trick of trade, and the stage, as you should know, has, perhaps, a hundred and one tricks beyond any other craft or profession. Mam’selle _____ is assuredly married to the little old Italian; and if not married _____”

A shrug of the shoulder finished the sentence of my editorial friend, very little to my satisfaction.

“The story goes,” he continued, “that he happened upon the poor girl in London, while in a state of great destitution, just after she had lost a mother, or while the mother was in the last stages of decay. That he provided them with present means, and availing himself of their necessities, married the girl, _____”

“Against her will?” I interrupted.

“No—not so—against her wish, perhaps, but not against her will. Destitution, and poverty, and hunger, have no will in such a place as London; and famine will reconcile a girl, however lovely, to a very strange connection. Mam’selle, who is English by birth, was thus persuaded to couple with this Italian, who makes himself very ridiculous here by his jealousies. He has already had a dozen quarrels where he had no cause for one; for, though the girl is a sort of rage at present—a distinction which she owes more to me than to herself—yet she is not deluded by applause, and takes it as humbly as if she knew its real value as well as the oldest veteran among us. If you really

desire an introduction, after what you have heard, I don't see that there will be any difficulty. She will be at rehearsal to-day at 12, M., and the matter can be easily managed."

I readily embraced the proposition. He continued:

"A week more will finish her career in New York. The rage now, she will soon give place to another novelty, and in ten days more be among the things that were. We are to have, by the next packet, a celebrated Harlequin, who can jump twenty feet high, take the ceiling in his teeth, and hold on thereby sufficiently long, to enable him to poach a dozen eggs for his supper by a machine which he takes up with him for that purpose. His legs, meanwhile, not to be outdone, are to go through all the movements of the famous Tilsit Waltz, and at the close he professes to be able to shuffle them off, with his boots, and drop down, finally, with his stumps again falling into the dismembered sockets, as truly as if the position had undergone mathematical arrangement."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"Well, I doubt not that the report of his wonders is somewhat exaggerated, but the report is enough. It will kill Mam'selle most effectually for the season, so that, to know her in the day of her glory, you must know her at once. I shall look for you at 12."

CHAPTER XI.

I WAS punctual. The hour was fortunately chosen. Mam'selle was in the Green Room alone. Her ugly little protector was absent—where, it mattered not to me,—so long as he was absent; and I had at length the felicity of speaking to the fair creature, whom, hitherto, I had not been permitted to approach. My address, I had reason to believe, said little in my favour. I was flushed, confused, agitated. I feel that I stammered while speaking the most customary nonsense; and I was so little the master of my own faculties, that I could not tell whether her composure was less or more than mine. But, in either event, perhaps, I had no reason for annoyance. If the woman, in such a case, preserves her composure—if she be any thing of a veteran in the arts of life—it does not displease her to look on the bashfulness of the unsophisticated heart of youth. There is a compliment conveyed by his terrors which is grateful, because of its freshness, to the heart which is no longer so: and if she was not composed—if like myself she trembled and was confounded, then it followed that my emotion must have escaped her sight. My friend, the Editor, congratulated me on my leaving the apartment upon the obvious impression which I had made. Before we left

her the company began to pour in—the various assemblage of a good stock-management. There were others too, not of the company,—who possessed the privileges of the interior—to whom the wires might be shown, and the mechanism of the magic, without danger. There were the Editors—a numerous tribe—the writers for the stage, some of the proprietors of the establishment, and a few of the dashing bloods of the town. To all of these the Prima Donna was the eye of attraction—the centre of the solar system in that little world. I felt myself very small and very awkward, when I witnessed the dashing freedom and consequential airs of most around me, as they approached to converse with one whose very glance had so completely unsettled my nervous system.—Finally, the little, old Italian, her protector, made his appearance, and with his *entrée* you would have fancied that we had suddenly fallen in with a mountain of ice. Every thing was frigid after his appearance. The dandies bowed at a more respectful distance, at the object of their previous devotion, while his little fiery eyes seemed to scrutinize every countenance with suspicion, and to find in every movement abundant cause to congratulate himself on having arrived in the very nick of time to prevent the worst of mischiefs.

To me, he gave less attention than I feared would have fallen to my lot. I had even begun to think that he failed to recognize me, and should certainly have believed so, but for a single sentence, which he uttered with a sinister grin, as we underwent the usual forms of introduction to one another.

“You be love music, vera moch, sare, I remembair, eh?”

The remark was simple in the ears of all but the Prima Donna and myself. I took care to regard it as such in the reply I made at the moment; but I remembered it, and availed myself of the opening which it gave me—for purposes of explanation—to call upon the couple at their residence.

CHAPTER XII.

I did so, and found the Prima Donna alone. I was this time sufficiently calm myself, to see that she was terribly agitated. Her dress and whole appearance were disordered. Her hair had found partial freedom from restraint,—her eyes were red with weeping,—and the traces of recent tears were apparent upon her pallid cheeks. She met me with a look full of equal intelligence and alarm.

“Oh! why, why have you come hither? Leave me, leave me, I implore you, sir—it is not well—it is not right; and he will believe every thing that is wrong. Leave me, sir, leave me if you ———”

How would she have finished that sentence had her tongue not failed in its office? I had barely time to form a pleasing conjecture on the subject—not to answer—when the little old Italian burst into the room, with the fiery, fearful, malignant aspect of a Sirocco. The poor woman sank upon a settee at his appearance, and covered her face with both her hands. The big tears oozed through her fingers, and her sobs were almost convulsions.

“Ha! ha! what for you come to my house. You lov’ music, but I break up de music—look you, I break up de music—so! so!—”

And with the action of a madman, seizing upon a guitar which lay upon one of the tables, he dashed it into a thousand fragments by repeated blows against the elbow of the sofa. Then turning to me, he exclaimed—

“You is villain, sare. I is turn out, tree, five villain from my house dis day, and break up de music. You is great villain, and you is come to my house,—dere is no more music in my house,—what for you is come, eh?”

I had risen on his entrance. I could scarcely contain myself during his proceedings. The tears of the girl had awakened my indignation—his brutality scarcely left me prudence to forbear violence, which seemed to be almost the duty of a gentleman under existing circumstances. Nothing but a consideration of her claims, and the wretched relation in which she stood to this miserable tyrant, kept my hands from his throat. For her sake, I subdued my tiger,—for her sake, I strove to answer mildly. I contented myself with saying that I came to explain my conduct in the previous interview when he was so much offended. But the violent old wretch did not allow me to finish what I was saying. He gave me the lie direct.

“You come for make my wife lef’ me, and go wid you. You tell lie—you is one villain, dat I shall make lef’ my house for evare.”

My blood was getting the better of my judgment, when the Prima Donna interposed. She rose from her seat with the manner of one who has conquered, but after a violent effort, and about whom still remain all the traces of the conflict.

“Oblige me, sir, if you please, by leaving the house; oblige me still more by avoiding it, and me, for ever. To acquire a friend is with me a misfortune—I need one, how much, Heaven only knows—but I wish for none. Leave me, sir; and, in going, believe me, that I at least suspect you of no evil, and am as grateful to you as if you meant nothing but good. If you fancy that you leave me unhappy, at least be satisfied that nothing which you could do or say would have the effect of making me otherwise.”

“Ha! you speaks to him in dis manner. You will have me kill you to death, you ——”

I forbear to repeat the horrible epithet which the monster used on this occasion. His words provoked me to fury, but when he coupled them with a blow—a blow by his vile hands upon that pure, sweet, imploring and noble face,—my fury became violence. I grasped him in my arms. I lifted him as if he had been an infant, in spite of all his struggles. I hurried with him to the window, the sash of which was raised, and a moment longer would have sufficed me to pitch him into the street. But my better angel, in the aspect of the wretched woman, his victim, came to keep me from a deed which I might have repented in suffering and shame. She recovered from the blow which had staggered her against the wall, and grasped my arm in season. I put the reptile down unharmed upon the floor, and he seized the first moment of his liberty to hurry from the apartment, not without giving a glance at the woman, which spoke volumes of treasured bitterness and revenge.

CHAPTER XIII.

My situation was now one of considerable awkwardness, and it did not lessen my annoyance to reflect that it was one into which I had been hurried by my own unregulated passions and imprudent vanity. But this was no moment for reflections such as these. It was evident that I now had no business there, even if the business had been legitimate which had carried me there at first. To remain longer in the house of one who had ordered my departure in language of brutality, and whose conduct had provoked me to violence, was surely against all received rules of gentility. And yet, how to leave the poor woman to his rage? Would he not wreak upon her weak person and unoffending head, all the venom which would be idly shown against the bosom of superior manhood? This was my apprehension—the apprehension that made me linger,—it was evident that the Prima Donna, herself, was not entirely without it.

“Do not—do not leave me,” she exclaimed passionately, as she beheld his departure, while with hands clasped in something like a mortal agony of fear, she approached me. “He will soon return—he is terrible in his anger—he will do some dreadful act.”

“Fear nothing—I will protect—I will stand by you to the last.”

I spoke with the look and language of a knight of the middle ages. Forgetful of the matter-of-fact and every-day character of the busy world around me—the age of money-changers and their greatest mart,—I was hurried away by my boyish feelings, and utterly lost in the seventh heaven of heroism. I would have taken her hand in mine as I addressed her; but the attempt

brought about an instant change in her manner. The fear of doing, seemed suddenly greater than that of suffering, wrong; and in tears no less energetic if less passionate than before, she now entreated my departure.

"Go, for God's sake, and leave me, leave me for ever. I do not blame you—no, no! But you cannot know the mischief you have done. My husband will never forgive me for this folly; and every moment of your longer stay will increase the difficulties, perhaps the dangers, in my way."

I told her there should be no difficulties—no dangers—that I would stand by and shield her from all harm. At that moment I felt myself equal to every danger; and would have faced the giant Ascaparte himself in her battle. But she knew her own relation to her jealous liege, and resolutely insisted upon my departure. I lingered until longer delay would have been impertinence, and then prepared to comply with her demand. But before leaving I proffered my assistance in the event of any further difficulty. I put my card into her hand. She calmly tore it into fragments which she threw into the grate.

"No, sir, no: I thank you, but you can render me no help—I shall need no assistance. I only ask you not to see me—not to know me any more. Forget that you have ever seen me."

"Impossible!"

She silenced my raptures by an impatient movement of her hand, and the sad sorrow of her countenance was exchanged to an expression of dignified purity, as she thus rebuked my extravagance. My passion yielded to respect. Her beauty and talent aroused the one—her virtuous and becoming conduct commanded the other. I bowed and was turning away, when, as if moved by some fear that her sternness had given pain, her features softened—she advanced—gave me her hand for a moment, then left me hurriedly for an inner chamber.

CHAPTER XIV.

I FIND it difficult for me to close this narrative. The events startle myself as I recall them with an air of utter improbability;—and yet I know them to be true, and how many share my knowledge. The next week the famous Prima Donna—she who had been the orb of loveliest attraction, rising nightly in song and splendour before the eyes of the whole city—the next week she had not only survived her glory, but was a corpse! She went to rehearsal the morning after the scene which I have just described was over; and, though indisposed, she played successfully that night. I saw her, and saw that there was a serious sickness in her system; but I ascribed the sickness rather to her

soul than to her body—to that poor heart—so fond, so young, so tender, so attractive,—sacrificed in the first hour of its maiden dawn to such a dreadful tyranny as that from which she suffered. For two nights after, being those of Saturday and Sunday, I saw nothing of her. Monday night she was announced to play, but her malady had increased—she did not appear, and her absence was accounted for by the manager. Tuesday produced a crisis in her professional fortunes. The great harlequin, who could jump twenty feet and take the ceiling in his teeth, made his appearance that night with wondrous éclat, and the Prima Donna, as my friend the editor had predicted, was almost as much forgotten as if she had never been. The next morning she was dead! The terrible annunciation came to me, while at the breakfast-table, in the morning papers:

“Mysterious. We are told, just as our paper was going to press, that Mam’selle ———, the lady who has been making such a sensation in the musical circles of our city for the last ten days, died suddenly last night, at the house of her protector, Mons. ———, in ———’s Place. There are some circumstances connected with this event which have awakened the suspicions of the police. An examination by the coroner takes place at an early hour this morning. The lady was young, very pretty, and singularly well constituted for the part of Prima Donna in the company to which she was attached. She was acknowledged by Mons. ———, to be his wife, and her virtue is stated to be beyond reproach, though, we understand, it has not been without suspicion. We trust for the credit of our city, that her death will be found to have taken place according to the ordinary events of nature.”

What a shock did I feel when I read this paragraph. I felt as if sight had been suddenly deprived me; but I recovered instantly to the most acute excitement of feeling. I darted up from the table, hurried to my chamber, put myself in condition to go forth, and reached the dwelling of the lovely victim in time for the examination. I too had my suspicions of foul play, and in my heart I swore that the malignant wretch who claimed to be her husband, and who, I felt sure, must have been her murderer, should not escape from the talons of justice and a just punishment, if my vigilance could fix them upon him.

A crowd was already assembled, and the coroner busy in telling out jurors for the examination. The corpse of the victim was placed at length upon a table. The eyes were closed—the features composed—she had died seemingly without a struggle, and this appeared to prove that she had died without pain. The presumptions were, accordingly, in favour of the supposition that her death had been natural. Not a muscle seemed out of place, governed by extreme tension, or strained in the slightest particular. The blood-vessels of the neck and forehead were charged

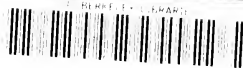
fully, and shone,—oh, how freshly with life and beauty,—through the clean transparent whiteness of her skin. I could have bent down, amidst all that crowd, and pressed my lips upon those rigid features which had teemed, but a few days before, with all that was pure, and sweet, and charming, in my sight.

The examination led to no discoveries, though it was conducted with considerable closeness and sagacity. The coroner was familiar with his duties, and not disposed to pretermitt their exercise. He was acute in his inquiries and closely observant of the persons who were examined as witnesses. Among these was Mons. ———. His features, now passionless and cold, dark yet inexpressive, confirmed the impressions of my own bosom that he was guilty of her death. How was it that he, who, while she lived, had been jealous to madness of all her movements, should so soon, so suddenly, lose all interest in her fate, unless he himself knew the fitting solution of the mystery. This, though to me conclusive, of the one conviction, was quite as conclusive with all around me of his innocence. His composure was in his favour. Strange enough! as if a man who was innocent of her murder, could have looked with composure, upon the inanimate form of one who had lately slept upon his bosom, whose eyes had gleamed with fire, whose cheeks with youth—whose voice had sent forth such heavenward aspirations of tenderness and love.

A cautious verdict of the jury finished the investigation. She “died from the visitation of God.” True: death from any cause, however strange,—however hurried—is still a visitation of God—God in that form of power which is most terrible to man. The glance of dire enmity and malignant hate which the Italian shot towards me from his half-shut eyes, as the verdict was declared, convinced me, not the less, however, that she died also from the “visitation of the devil.” His black heart had decreed her doom—his viperous hands had compassed it—his Italian art had enabled him to do so with impunity. “After life’s fitful fever she sleeps well!”—The murderer still lives, but is he, therefore, the less a token of God’s eternal justice? Has he escaped punishment? Is he safe? No! no! The hangman is for ever present to his imagination—fear dogs his footsteps—he is haunted by the hounds of terror—he breathes the breath of sleepless apprehension—bitterness is in the bread he eats, and venom in the cup from which he drinks. He lives a prolonged form of death, only too happy if it could be that he might not live for ever.

THE END.





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